

“In the Thick of Humiliation”

There’s a bumper sticker (and a T-shirt, and likely a poster, that says, *“Teenagers — Quick, Leave Home Today While You Still Know Everything!”* The “kid” in Jesus' story is one of those young people who doesn't need the advice and counsel of an older brother or his father. He knows what he wants and he doesn't need anyone to tell him otherwise. *“Give me what's mine,”* he says, *“I'm outa here!”*

This young man is one of those people who learns in the school of hard knocks. Chances are, many of us here today can relate! In any case, the speed of the boy's exit from his family is matched only by the speed at which he finds himself broke, homeless and without a friend. Billie Holiday sang it first: *“Money, you’ve got lots of friends Crowding round the door; When you’re gone, spending ends, They don’t come round no more.”*

While a good Jewish boy's deep humiliation is reflected in his having to feed the pigs and wish he could eat the food intended for them, for us it would be the anticipation of having to eat “crow.” Have you ever been humiliated and wished there was a short road home to feeling better about yourself? The “distant country” of today’s Gospel is easily related to the place we find ourselves after a bad decision, a dreadful failure, or an embarrassing revelation.

In the event you cannot imagine being in the prodigal son's shoes, I want you to do something. Don't think about it . . . just answer from the top of your head: *“What is there in your life that would cause you to simply die of embarrassment if it were suddenly projected on a large screen right here in front of everybody?”* Anyone want to share? Some of what may occur to us as we look into the nooks and crannies of our lives will be things that are known only to us and to God. And finally, when it comes right down to it, there are some things about ourselves that are known to God alone . . . the things that cause us to sometimes say, *“I don't know why I do the things I do!”* The answer of course is, *“Only God knows*

that.” The prodigal son was clueless when it came to the consequences of his actions.

There is a progression in this story which yields some important dynamics for understanding ourselves and others. There is a straight line between this young man's arrogance and his eventual humiliation. Yet, his humiliation produces a genuine humility which puts him in a place where he can receive grace.

Humility is a frequent consequence of humiliation. Take note here . . . grace can not gain entrance into a life which lacks humility. Some people may have the good fortune of possessing humility which is not the product of humiliation, but there are many who have to endure the hardship of learning humility through humiliation. The key here, however, is this: It is in the midst of deepest humiliation that the prodigal son discovers the depth of his father's love.

The progression in this "best loved" story of grace is: 1) A Bad Decision; 2) Hitting the Wall; 3) A Better Decision; 4) Experiencing the Grace. As we explore the dynamics of the story, we want to keep in mind three viewpoints: There is dad, big brother, and little brother. The viewpoint that touches you most will be very dependent upon your life experience.

First comes A Bad Decision

Connell Cowan and Melvyn Kinder write in their book Smart Women / Foolish Choices : Finding the Right Men, Avoiding the Wrong Ones: *“A woman complained after her third marriage failed, ‘I just don't know what I've done wrong, but I just know God is punishing me. This is the third time I've married someone who turned out to be an alcoholic who abused me!’”*

Bad decisions sneak up on us — they blindside us. They rarely come with red flags or “beware — bad decision ahead” signs attached. Rarely (except in the case of truly self-destructive people) do we intentionally or even consciously make a bad decision. It might seem like the thing to do at the time, or we just didn't think about it, or we wouldn't help ourselves.

We certainly didn't say, *"I think I'll wreck my life!"*

I can just hear the prodigal son saying, *"This place is way too boring and stifling. I need some excitement. Give me my cut now, I'm outta here!"* The big brother, on the other hand sees the younger as a self-centered brat who gets away with everything. *"Maybe it will be better around here without him!"* The father sees a child he can not control. He sees disaster ahead for his son, but knows there is no way he can get in the kid and do his learning for him. Love means he has to let go and pray God will go with the boy.

Next comes Hitting the Wall.

Luke doesn't tell us how long the young man's money lasted, but judging by the speed of his cashing in his assets, he seems to have gone through his money in a hurry. No matter how long it was, it must have seemed like a blur. One day he's saying, *"Later!"* to his family and the next thing he knows, he's in a foreign land, where the economy goes bust, he's broke and the proverbial wall has been hit. He's so hungry, he's willing to clean floors at McDonald's for leftover fries or wash dishes at the diner for the chance to grab a scraps from the plates.

There is an important spiritual truth here. The shortest distance between two points can very quickly turn into a very long distance. The prodigal son took a quick trip to a "distant" land; a short trip. The way home however, was long. It began "when he came to himself" and did not end until the winding road took him finally to his father's arms.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, there is an understanding that people never get on the road to recovery until they "hit bottom," or in other words, hit the wall. Some people are unfortunate enough to never hit bottom. They never recover or even begin to recover. Bottom for them is death. This is the father's risk. He might have wanted to beg, plead or even lock the boy up, but he had to let the son go in order to have even have the possibility of having him back. The older brother meanwhile is enjoying the peace and quiet.

There is a striking truth that jumps out here. The journey of the prodigal son into the distant country was a voluntary one into what he expected to be fulfillment and joy. In his humiliation — when he hit the wall — he discovered his true home was back in his father's arms. In the Christian story, Jesus takes a voluntary journey into what he knew would be humiliation. It is not too much of a stretch to suggest that he takes the “hit” for us!

Now follows A Better Decision

“I will get up and go to my father . . .” That’s the turning point! No matter who it is, where it is or why it is, whenever we come to the point of saying ***“I will get up and go to my father . . .”*** we are certain of the outcome because we have a preview of the end of the story in the story of the prodigal son. Out of humiliation came humility and out of humility came grace.

Can you remember the last time you “came to yourself”? You became aware that you were wrong. Dead wrong! Take a moment if need be and think about it. You were wrong. Do you find it difficult to admit that? (Whenever I ask a question like that, I can envision every spouse turning to their spouse with that look that says, *“Boy, has he got your number this evening!”*) Can you remember the sense of relief that began when you said, *“I will get up and go to my spouse and say . . .”* or, *“I will get up and go to my boss and say . . .”* or, *“I will get up and go to my brother . . . or neighbor . . . or friend . . .”* That decision demands humility.

Here's a definition of humility. *“Humility is a realistic assessment of who I am — before God.”* I want you to see how important those last two words are! I might delude myself when I do an assessment of who I am — but when I add those last two words, *“before God,”* that changes things! So when the time comes that you need to reverse a bad decision and the consequences of that decision are weighing heavily upon you, there is a sure road to recovery. It is an action that takes place within your spirit. *“I will get up and go . . .”*

With that come Experiencing the Grace

There is a critical truth underlying this whole message today: The father is waiting with open arms. The prodigal son can't see the fact that his father is waiting at the gate to the old homestead. He comes out each day to see if there is any sign of his son on the horizon. He is the parent waiting for the phone call from a run-a-way child, a wife waiting for her husband to send the roses with an apology, the friend hoping that the friendship will not be lost. If only we fully knew the grace that awaits our better decision to *“get up and go . . .”*

When you have fallen on your face, feel unworthy and want to crawl in a hole, do something different — reach out. Jesus went through a public humiliation that is unimaginable to you and me. And here's the rub . . . Jesus didn't make any bad decision that brought about his humiliation! Nevertheless he knows what it is like to be exposed, rejected and scorned. The more we get in touch with the ways Jesus meets us in the everyday experiences of our lives, the more we understand that there is never a time when he does not understand what we are going through.

You have heard the words to the song, *“Love is lovelier the second time around . . .”* It isn't as though we were not loved before we fell on our face, but there is something wonderful about being loved even though we fell on our face. One definition of a true friend is, *“someone you can make a fool out of yourself with and not wonder the next day how they feel about you.”* So how does God feel about you when you have failed miserably? *“. . . while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”*

But a lot of us then get caught up in the shouldas . . . That's the older brother's dilemma: This kid shoulda been made to suffer at least a little. This kid shoulda never been accepted back in the family. This kid shoulda had to earn the right to be called son again. Two things we need to note about that. First, when the younger son asked for his inheritance, Jesus tells us that the father *“divided his property between them.”* The

older brother was more than content to accept the same deal as the younger brother, and in effect to make the same declaration: *“It’s better if Dad is as good as dead.”* Second, “shouldas” that would be attached to the welcome to the younger son would be like trying to take back the kiss. In other words, grace bestowed is just that: it is bestowed — it is not lent out.

Now granted, the younger son will probably find a greater delight in being in his father’s house if he now functions like a son. That may mean things like not tracking mud onto the expensive carpet, not spitting on the furniture, blowing his nose into a handkerchief, not his sleeve . . . But none of those are conditions of his acceptance.

Whether he wants to admit to it or not (remember, his solution was to say, *“I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”*) he is still a son. He may forget that; his brother may deny that; but the father affirms that. Even in the far country, that truth stood firm. You are God’s child — even when you forget it, deny it, act contrary to it . . . and it will remain true no matter how far afield you may wander. And because you are God’s child, there is never a time when God will turn His back on you.

Throughout our Lenten journey, we are encouraged to try to open up more fully to our relationship with Christ. So take a look inward and then look outward with some new perspective. Can you think of a time when you really needed God's understanding for some failure in your life (maybe today)? Did you reach out to Christ during this time — or was your sense of humiliation too great? I want you to know that God waits for your return no matter how profound you regard your failure.

Here's the clincher: Are you willing to be as understanding of others in their failures as you want Christ to be of you? Who, specifically today, might this change your attitude toward? You know what has to happen. You need to get up and go to that person. You need to run to that person and put your arms around that person and kiss that person. And you especially need to know that you can run to that person and put your arms

around that person and kiss that person — because in this, as in everything else in life, Christ Jesus is there with you, in the thick of things.

Amen.